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EDITORIALS

The Bulgar Connection

SINCE SOFIA, the capital of Communist Bulgaria, is a city aswirl with intrigue, the fact that officials there probably knew in advance of the planned attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II comes as not much of a surprise. Sofia is evidently at one and the same time a city of exasperating regulation, and a place where almost any kind of a deal may be made.

Situated on the principal land route from Europe to Turkey and the Middle East beyond, Sofia has become a strategic focus for the transfer of all kinds of goods. And these can range from dope to weapons to simple information. The New York Times says the city has the reputation of being one of the focal points of high-living international crime syndicates; a major center where merchants and agents, couriers and carriers, meet, strike their deals and dispatch the goods.

So while the Bulgarians may have gotten wind of the plot on the pope, the Central Intelligence Agency is also convinced that neither the Bulgarians nor the Soviet Union instigated the attack. The would-be assassin, Turkish terrorist Mehmet Ali Agca, was a "known crazy" who had threatened publicly to kill the pope a year earlier. CIA analysts reason the Bulgarians would not have actively involved themselves in Agca's plotting since he was so clearly an unstable person who would probably be captured.

AND IF THIS CIA assessment is accepted by the White House, it has been noted that President Reagan will probably still feel free to take part in a meeting with Soviet leader Yuri Andropov — something an American president would have found it difficult to do if direct Soviet involvement in an attack on the pope had been established. Had that happened, it would, as one American official put it, have been "like the U-2 affair in reverse; a watershed in Soviet-American relations that would have effects for a decade."

It may be remembered that when the U-2 spy plane was shot down, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev withdrew an invitation to President Eisenhower to visit Moscow; and that particular chill hung on for 12 years.

The sensitive nature of a possible Bulgarian-Soviet connection to the assassination attempt has led to suggestions by some intelligence experts that the United States is deliberately steering away from blaming the Kremlin for the attack to avoid worsening Soviet-American relations.

There are undoubted elements of high intrigue that adhere to the Agca case. These also underscore its extreme delicacy. The fact is that the truth will doubtless never be known with 100 percent certainty. So American officials are demonstrating intelligence in the care with which they react to this affair.